

Participatory Radio and what it means

David Griffiths

THE ABC's access station 3ZZ went to air in Melbourne on May 12. The station broadcasts between 6 and 11 pm every night.

Monday night is given over to programs in Italian; Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday are devoted, respectively, to Mediterranean languages, Greek and other European languages. On Friday, social issues are aired; on Saturday the program covers experimental music, drama and poetry; on Sunday, local issues.

For each night, a programming committee convened by a representative of a particular community advises the ABC on the operation of the station. An ABC producer is attached to each programming committee. The station is offering various groups, particularly ethnic groups, a unique opportunity to talk among themselves in their own languages.

Though 3ZZ is a step in the right direction, participatory radio is ultimately what you make of it. It is something that people have to build up themselves. There is a danger that the experts, the activists and the politicians will prefabricate a system, and call it participatory radio.

What it should mean

Participatory radio *should* mean greater citizen involvement in planning, operating and controlling radio. Ideally, it gives ordinary people access to radio. No longer would they have to depend on the discretion of professional communicators.

At present, professionals decide who is to be heard and in what conditions they are to be heard. The ordinary person is the first and largest minority. Our society, including the media, is most responsive to and conciliatory towards organised groups and institutions, and least ready to listen to unorganised individuals.

It should also mean that minorities have access to radio — trade unions, industry groups, professional groups — including the opportunity to express their point of view, and to determine the circumstances in which their point of view is put forward.

Ultimately, it means minorities controlling their own radio stations and planning, producing and presenting their own programs. 'Minorities' include the groups mentioned above, and also political minorities with an ideology at variance with the political mainstream, specific interest minorities, cultural minorities whose values and attitudes differ from the established culture, minorities of one, and social minorities with specific and particular interests.

Apart from the desirability of widespread debate on matters of public importance, and greater access to the media, there is also a need to reveal the unrepresentative nature of most organisations, and return some power to the individual, and to recognise the existence of fundamentally incompatible viewpoints.

Three forms of radio

There are three main forms of radio:

Professional radio, where studios and equipment are controlled by professionals who decide who is to be given access and under what conditions. (This is the least complicated. It means that a corporate or commercial body determines access, avoiding the issues raised in deciding who gets access, and who does the selecting.)

Access radio, where studios and equipment are controlled by professionals, but community groups and individuals present their own programs with the help of professional staff.

Community radio, where groups and individuals entirely control studios and equipment. There are two types of community radio stations, local and general. Local stations are established within a specific geographical area, controlled by particular groups but open to the whole community within the area; general stations broadcast to an unspecified area, controlled by particular groups, and primarily serving those groups.

Inarticulate and boring?

It is patently wrong that the ABC and commercial networks should decide who is to be heard and what is to be heard. Some have argued that opening the airwaves would be absurd, because there is no time available, because ordinary people are inarticulate, because the public would be bored by ordinary people.

Much of this argument rests on the assumption that the established stations give the public what it wants. In fact, they give the public what it is used to, and these are two very different things. It also assumes that access to radio is solely for the politically prejudiced who wish to propagandise. But although it is true that the majority of radio's critics have political biases, it is not true to say that this political minority would be the sole, or even the major beneficiary of participatory radio.

Choice is critical

One drawback with 3ZZ can be seen in terms of choice. The fundamental choice of whether or not the station was to be controlled by the ABC was predetermined by the ABC's insistence that control was not at issue.

Subsidiary choices have been predetermined by the resources the ABC has made available. (For example, the number of staff determines the extent and nature of assistance provided to participants.) They have also been limited by the participants' awareness (or otherwise) of the ABC's resources and of programming possibilities; not to mention their own lack of time and resources and consequent dependence on ABC staff.

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